

Teaching and Learning Spanish in the Kenyan multilingual Society: Strengths and Challenges

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Introduction

The fact that there are persons who show an interest in learning a foreign language shows that the human person is not satisfied with communicating only with members of his linguistic society. It can be said that he feels the urge to cross physical, social and mental barriers in order to establish interpersonal relations for the purpose of communicating and sharing ideas, sentiments, etc. This interaction results in man's personal growth and of the knowledge of the world around him, and this will in turn work towards bringing about the reality of the global village that modern man is in search of establishing.

While it is true that childhood is the best time for one to learn a foreign language with ease, it is no less true that more and more adolescents and adults are in the classroom learning a foreign language in order to communicate in it, or in order to pursue studies or work in another country.

The state of foreign languages and local languages in Kenya

The Spanish language is gradually growing in importance worldwide, and consequently it is acquiring the capacity to open doors to employment, travel, possibilities of further studies, etc. In Kenya, the need to learn Spanish is felt, and there are a number of language schools and academies which make a good language business out of this. Although in the Kenyan education system at secondary level French and German may be taught and examined, Spanish has still not made its way there though it is taught in a number of International schools. At university level, United States International University (USIU) is a pioneer, since Spanish was introduced in 1994. Gradually, other Universities have followed, e.g. Strathmore University, Moi University, University of Nairobi.

Located in East Africa, Kenya is blest with a variety of ethnic groups each with its own culture and an array of at least 42 languages. The national language is Kiswahili which, besides, is an official language along with English. The medium for imparting education in schools in the urban area is English. English and Swahili are taught as compulsory examinable subjects in the public primary schools. In the rural areas, vernacular languages are used especially in the first three years of primary education, though depending on the standard of the school English may be used. In all cases, English and Kiswahili feature on the school time-table and they are compulsory examinable subjects.

The Kenyan child can be classified according to three models: a) he acquires the mother tongue and almost simultaneously Kiswahili, and then he learns English and Kiswahili formerly when he goes to School b) he acquires English, then may learn a little Kiswahili and perhaps understand his mother tongue c) he acquires English, then

acquires Kiswahili and then learns English and Kiswahili at school. In most cases, Kiswahili is acquired by the child as he interacts with his play mates, or in the house, especially if the house help speaks a different language from that of his mother tongue or she is not conversant with English. The child may also acquire English at home, especially if he has older siblings or English is one of the languages spoken at home. Whichever way we view the situation, English and Kiswahili are taught in school all the same. When a Kenyan student embarks on the study of a foreign language at the University, he is at least bilingual, and in many cases multilingual: he speaks his mother tongue, Kiswahili and English. It is worth mentioning that the language used for socializing among the youth is a slang called *Sheng*, which is a mixture of Kiswahili and English. This means that, although the texts we shall cite make reference to second language learning, we are actually dealing with third and fourth language learning.

As mentioned before, USIU has years of experience in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language. Most of the students at the University are Kenyan. There are also students from other African countries as well as from other parts of the world. The study will focus on the Kenyan students. The age ranges between 18/19 and 24/25 years of age, the lower corresponding to the beginning of University career, and the upper to the end, with a margin of three years, though for the mature students there is no age limit. The basic semesters stipulated by the University are two, amounting 3 hours a week and hence 45 class hours in a semester. The hours dedicated to the English language are the same, and some students actually study the two languages concurrently. Spanish is still a novelty in Kenya and in most of Africa, and this implies a new challenge in foreign language teaching and learning in the African context.

Some of the questions we shall be addressing in this article are: a) Is language assimilation the same in the case of a learner who becomes a bilingual upon learning the second language as in one who is already bilingual before learning yet another language? b) Does the fact that the target language is totally unrelated to the mother tongue or primary language hamper the process of learning or is it an asset? c) Are adults beyond language learning?

Literature review

Foreign language learning is presented as wrapped in a lot of mystery, and only a few privileged adults are said to learn and use a language effectively. I wondered whether this mystery might be a result of a group limiting access to knowledge or to scarcity of duly qualified language teachers.

There are many approaches and methods in language teaching (Richards and Rodgers 1995, Brown 1987) and the teacher should know them and adopt those that he finds most relevant to his situation. A lot of emphasis is placed on teaching language, and in most cases the teacher's preparation is limited to technical training. Richards (1998) advocates a holistic approach to the teacher's education and consequent development. In order to impart knowledge, and language is a type of knowledge, the teacher needs the collaboration of the students. The students can help one another, e.g. when they work in groups. It can be said that the students among themselves and along with the teacher, form a team which pursues goals and objectives (Brown 1994).

There is a very close relation between language and culture, and this means that in order to learn and use a language effectively one must be aware of the cultural associations of the language (Bamgbose 1994). At USIU, and I'm certain that most language teachers share the same opinion, the students do not consider that learning culture is part of learning a language. The teacher has therefore to think of attractive ways of presenting this information and convincing the students that as they live in a global world, this will be of use to them.

The first major implication of studies in intercultural communication is the promotion of international understanding and avoidance of cultural interference, since much of international communication presupposes intercultural communication as well. By drawing attention to the factors that lead to cultural interference and cultural conflict, international understanding is promoted (Bamgbose 1994: 98).

The term *second language* does not refer only to the second language that is learnt after acquiring the first one, but also to the third and above (Brown 1987). Our search for literature specifically on third or fourth language was in vain. Only Brown (1987) makes a mention of third language.

Methodology

The data for this research was derived from analyzing students' performance during the first semester of Spanish at USIU. This included assignments, examinations and oral expression. Dictation, written comprehension, grammar, translation, vocabulary and culture were some of the areas on which the students were examined. Our focus was on errors, with a view to understanding what the student had learnt, and what he was communicating through the errors.

Data collection

While correcting the papers, and in some cases *a posteriori*, we recorded errors with the aim of assessing:

- Conjugation of regular and irregular verbs, e.g. Tener (to have)
- How to talk about age in Spanish
- The position of adjectives in Spanish; agreement of articles and adjectives according to number and gender
- Vocabulary
- Oral expression of students in spontaneous dialogue
- Impact of Kenyan multilingualism on the learning of Spanish as a foreign language
- What was being conveyed through original or unusual errors?

In order to facilitate reference, we shall number the examples we shall cite. When we single out a verb that we consider important in conveying some specific information, we will use bold letters for Kiswahili and underlined for Spanish. Proper translation of sentences from both languages will be in italics while the literal translation will be in ordinary print.

Error analysis**a) Morphological errors**

These are the most common. Many times they involve attributing wrong verb endings to subjects, wrong genders to nouns and consequently to the adjectives or applying the wrong conjugation to a verb, e.g. an –ar conjugation to –an –ir/er verb. Below we provide three sentences with their correct translations and some of the translations of the translations sourced from the students' work.

<i>My sister is fifteen years old</i>	Mi hermana tiene quince años
<i>My favourite colour is white</i>	Mi color favorite es blanco
<i>Where was the red chair?</i>	¿Dónde estaba la silla roja?

- (1a) Mi hermana **tengo** quince años
My sister I have fifteen years
- (1b) Mi hermana **tene** [tiene] quince años
My sister has fifteen years
My sister is fifteen years old
- (1c) Mi hermana **tienes** quince años
My sister you have fifteen years
- (1d) Mi hermana **tenemos** quince años
My sister we have fifteen years
- (1e) Mi favorita [favorito] color es blanca [blanco]
My favourite colour is white
My favourite colour is white
- (1f) ¿Dónde est**uviste** el silla rojo?
Where were you the chair red?

To the comprehension question *¿Dónde trabaja la señora López?* (Where does Mme Lopez work?), the expected answer is: *La señora López trabaja en el centro* (Mme Lopez works in the Centre). However, the following reponses were recorded:

- (2a) La señora López trabajos **a su**
The lady López works to her/his
- (2b) La señora López trabajas en el centro
The lady López you work in the centre
- (2c) Trabjo [trabajo] en el centro
I work in the centre

The messages communicated through these errors are:

- (1a): The student has understood that Mi has something to do with first person singular, and for that reason he conjugates the verb in first person singular. The verb tener is irregular in all the persons except 1st and 2nd plural, but it has been conjugated correctly. He has not understood that Mi is a possessive adjective indicating here that this sister belongs to 1st person singular and therefore she is third person singular. The correct conjugation is tiene.
- (1b): As we have just mentioned, the verb tener is irregular. The student here has not internalized that, and he conjugates the verb as if it were a regular -er verb.
- (1e): The student conceives colour as feminine, and hence gives the noun a feminine adjective; her placement of the adjective is consonant to the English language.
- (2a,b) Here we can appreciate that the students have understood that 'La Señora López is third person singular, and they make a transfer of the English third person -s to Spanish. In a) the student manifests confusion: he is basing himself on the English conjugation of the verb (to) work, hence Yo trabajo, tu trabajo, ella trabaj~~os~~.
- (2c,d,f) and (1c): These students do not know which morphemes correspond to the different persons, they use them at random. The positive factor about (1f) is that the student is consistent: he believes silla is masculine, and therefore uses a masculine article and a masculine adjective. We can say that although (1a,b,e,f) are wrong, it is worth commending the students because they have gone a step ahead of students (1c,d) and (2a,b,c).

b) Lexical errors

The following examples were sourced from the students' oral expression.

- (3) ¿Cuál es tu color favorito? *What is your favourite colour?*
Mi color favorito es **marido**
My favourite colour is husband.

The confusion is between morado *purple* and marido *husband*.

- (4) ¿Qué cenaste anoche? *What did you have for supper last night?*
Yo cené razón con carne
*I had **reason** with meat.*

Confusion between razón *reason* and arroz *rice*

The student was asked to substitute the underlined word by a synonym.

(5) El último mes del año es diciembre y el _____ es enero.

Expected answer: El ultimo mes del ano es diciembre y l primero es enero.

The student produced:

El ultimo mes del año es diciembre y el primavera es enero.

Here, there is confusion between primero (*first*) and primavera (*spring*).

Subseuently, the student was asked to translate the following sentence to English:

Marta y Paula no compraron los billetes.

Expected translation: *Marta and Paula did not buy the tickets.*

The student produced (6):

(6) *Marta and Paula did not compare the Bibles.*

Here, there is confusion between comprar (*to buy*) and comparar (*to compare*). There is something positive, however, and that is the fact that the student noticed that the verb corresponds to 3rd person plural. As he could not remember what billetes are, he resorted to guess work.

c) Lexical morphological errors

The students were asked to translate the following sentences:

I. *The butcher closed the window well*

Expected answer: El carnicero cerró la ventana bien.

And:

II. *Spring is my favourite season of the year*

La primavera es mi estación favorita.

The students produced the following answers for (I):

(17a) El **buchero** cerró la ventana bien.

(17b) El **carnero** _____ el ventana bien.

And for (II):

(18) El **espringo** es mi estacion favorita del año

Then the student was asked to provide antonyms for the words in italics:

(19) Él escribe con la mano *izquierda* y también con la mano _____

Expected answer: la mano *derecha*

He produced: la mano *dezquierda*.

The student was later asked to provide synonyms for the words in italics:

(20) La secretaria *mandó* / ____ la carta.

Expected answer: *envió*.

He produced: *sendió*

These errors observed in (c) are very interesting. They are a result of overgeneralization, but they *communicate* what the learner has assimilated, and they clearly indicate how the teacher should help to correct the error.

- **Buchero** shows that the student knows the morpheme required to form a trade/profession; he could not remember the Spanish lexeme, so he created one from English. The error is logical because from carne meat the right word should be **carnero** as translation (17b) shows. Here we have to apply an exception to the rule and the word is *carnicero*. The other error in (17b) is owed to the fact that the student conceives *ventana* as masculine, and he consequently gives it a masculine article.
- **Espringo** shows that the student is aware that Spanish places a vowel *e-* before a word that begins by *sp-* as in the case of *espinaca*, *España*, *espantar*, etc. He is also aware that the Spanish masculine noun usually ends in *-o* in singular. As he could not remember the Spanish word, he made one up, and he gave it a corresponding masculine definite article.
- **Dezquierda** shows the student has learnt that *des-* is the morpheme used for the formation of antonyms. The correct word is *derecha*.
- **Sendió** manifests that the student has a strong morphological base although he is lexically weak. He has made out that the verb is in 3rd person singular and the tense is simple past. He knows that *mandar* is *to send*. As he cannot remember *enviar*, he invents a verb, and he attaches the correct tense, person and number.

'The degree of the communicative value of errors (e.g. errors of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary ... etc.) varies: some errors have little effect, some cause irritation, while some may cause communicative difficulties.' (Shesha 95: 5). Considering that the errors we have examined are made by learners who have had only 45 hours of Spanish in a semester and they do not live in a Spanish speaking country, it is very encouraging for anyone who may be contemplating learning Spanish.

Result

Given the variety of mother tongues spoken by the students, it would be difficult or at least the study would have to be very lengthy if we were to consider each one individually and how its knowledge hampers or facilitates the learning of Spanish.

We will therefore use Kiswahili in place of mother tongue and occasionally allude to the mother tongue where appropriate.

Spanish and Kiswahili differ from one another from the morphological point of view since the former is inflecting while the latter is agglutinating (Comrie 1989). They also differ genetically as Spanish is Indo-European (Moreno 1996; Yule 1996) while Swahili is of the Niger Congo branch (Williamson and Blench 2000). Notwithstanding these differences, there are points of convergence which should serve as strengths in the learning of Spanish.

Strengths of teaching and learning Spanish in the Kenyan multilingual society

- Both languages have the same vowel phonemes, and they share most of the consonant phonemes (Polomé 1967; Mgullu 2001). This makes it relatively easy for a person who can read Kiswahili to read Spanish, and the same applies to writing. The observation in the classroom situation is that in a relatively short time the students are able to take down dictation with minor orthographic errors, most of them transferred from English and a few from the mother tongue. However, in the period between 30 and 45 hours of the course their dictation is very good except for the omission of some accents. By the end of the first semester, that is 45 hours, most students can read any given Spanish text with Spanish pronunciation and intonation.
- Again, different as the languages may be, there are some constructions that are identical in both languages, e.g. age is expressed through the verb *to have* tener and **kuwa na** which is literally *to be with*.

(1a) ¿Qué edad tienes/tiene Usted?/¿Cuántos años tienes/tiene Usted?
What age you have/ how many years you have
How old are you?

U-na umri gani?/U-na miaka mingapi?
You have age which/ you have years how many
How old are you?

(1b) Tengo treinta años
I have thirty years
I am thirty years old

Ni-na miaka thelathini
I-have years thirty
I am thirty years old

- Both Spanish and Kiswahili and most African languages use the verb 'to hurt'/'to bite' (Spn) doler and (Swa) **kuumwa** in the passive to express an ache.

- (2) Me duele la cabeza/la cabeza me duele
To me it hurts/pains the head
I have a head-ache

Kichwa ki-na-ni-uma/ni-na-umwa na kichwa
Head it-PRESENT- me-bite/hurt / I-PASSIVE-bite/hurt by head
I have a head-ache

- As the conjugated verbs includes the subject, its presence in the sentence is not absolutely necessary, unless for the sake of clarity and hence to avoid ambiguity.

- (3) (Yo) Escribo una carta
I I write a letter
I write a letter

(Mimi) Na-andika barua
I I write letter
I write a letter.

- The formation of ordinal numbers from 16 onwards is identical.

- (4) Diez y seis, diez y siete, diez y ocho, diez y nueve, veinte, veinte y uno
Ten and six, ten and seven, ten and eight, ten and nine, twenty, twenty and one
Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty one

Kumi na sita, kumi na saba, kumi na nane, kumi na tisa, ishirini, ishirini na moja
Ten and six, ten and seven, ten and eight, ten and nine, twenty, twenty one
Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty one

- The position of descriptive adjectives is after the noun.

- (5) La abuela prepara una comida deliciosa
The grandmother she prepares/is preparing a meal delicious
The grandmother/grandmother is preparing/cooking a delicious meal

Nyanya a-na-pika chakula kitamu
Grandmother she-PRESENT-cook food delicious.
Granny is cooking a delicious meal.

- Both Spanish and Kiswahili have a locative, derived in both cases from the verb *to have*. In both languages it is conjugated in third person singular only. The Spanish form is *hay there is/there are*, derived from the verb *haber*. The Kiswahili counterpart is **kuna** *there is/there are*, derived from the verb **kuwa na**, *to be with*.

- (6a) Hay dos tazas y un plato en la mesa
 There are two cups and a plate in/on the table
There are two cups and a plate on the table

Kuna vikombe viwili na sahani moja meza-ni
 There are cups two and plate one table in
There are two cups and a plate on the table

- (6b) Hay una reunión de padres hoy
 There is a meeting of parents today
There is a parents' meeting today

Kuna mkutano wa wazazi leo
 There is meeting of parents today
There is a parents' meeting today

- The demonstrative adjectives in both Kiswahili and Spanish have a three fold dimension:

- (7a) Closeness of the object to the speaker:

Este libro/esta carta
 This book/this letter
This book/this letter

Kitabu hiki/barua hii
 Book this/letter this
This book/this letter

- (7b) Closeness of the object to the hearer:

Ese libro/esa carta
 That book/that letter
That book/that letter

Kitabu hicho/barua hiyo
 Book that/letter that
That book/that letter

- (7c) The object is far from speaker and hearer:

Aquel libro/aquella carta
 That book/that letter
That book/that letter

Kitabu kile/barua ile
 Book that/letter that
That book/that letter

- Kenyans are eager language learners, and whether it is by nature or because of the circumstances that at times force one to study or work in an area where a language different from the mother tongue is spoken, a Kenyan feels he should be part of that community and one way of identifying with the people there is to speak their language or at least to make an effort to learn it. Thus, the ground is fertile to receive any language.

Challenges encountered in learning and teaching Spanish

- A common challenge that most second language learners face is impatience: one hopes to attain proficiency in the shortest time possible. The *instant* grammar models that can be purchased at any book store say it all too clearly as their titles indicate: *Spanish without toil* by Assimil and *Spanish in three months* by Isabel Cisneros, to cite a few. Learning a foreign language is a painful, hard experience (Ehlick: 1994). To aggravate the matter, the learner expects he will learn without committing errors.
- At other times, the problem is that the teacher is not adequately prepared for the task. He may be a Spanish native speaker or a foreigner who speaks Spanish, but that is not a guarantee that he is qualified to teach the language. On the other hand, he may have the necessary preparation but the approach, and consequently the method, is faulty. This is usually the case in commercial language schools.
- Other times the approach and method are laudable, but the syllabus to be covered in a limited time is too vast.

Specifically in the USIU experience, the following are some of the challenges:

- The greatest challenge is the primary language, i.e. English. The fact that Kiswahili, most of the African languages (if not all) and Spanish use the verb 'to have' to express age should be a strength, but it turns out that the English influence is too strong, and consequently the students often use the verb 'to be'. The students were asked to translate this sentence: *I am twenty five years old*. The following were some of the answers:

- (8) Soy veinte y cinco años
 I am twenty and five years
 Yo soy viente [veinte] y cinco [cinco] años
 I am twenty and five years
 Yo soy veinte y cinco
 I I am twenty and five
 I am twenty five years old

They used the verb *ser* one of the forms of the verb *to be*. The expected answer was:

Tengo veinte y cinco años
I have twenty and five years

As seen previously, both Kiswahili and Spanish have the same order in the location of descriptive adjectives. Unfortunately it is not the case in English where the order is adjective followed by noun. The students very often follow the English order. Thus:

- (9) Un alto hombre/una limpia casa
A tall man / a clean house

Expected answer:

Un hombre alto/ una casa limpia
A man tall / a house clean

Mtu mrefu/ nyumba safi
Man tall / house clean
A tall man / a clean house

The Spanish article and adjective must agree with the noun in number and gender and something similar holds true regarding Swahili /African language adjective which must reflect the class and number of the noun. One would expect this to facilitate learning, but once again English seems to have the upper hand here, and the students form the noun plural, but they leave the adjective in singular.

- (10) Maria y Pamela son guapa
Maria and Pamela they are beautiful (sing)
Maria and Pamela are beautiful

Correct sentence:

Maria y Pamela son guapas
Maria and Pamela they are beautifuls
Maria and Pamela are beautiful

Maria na Pamela ni warembo
Maria and Pamela they are beautifuls
Maria and Pamela are beautiful

As can be seen, the Kiswahili equivalent is very close to the Spanish, the only difference is that the verb *to be* **Kuwa** in Kiswahili, has only one form for singular and plural irrespective of the person.

- The verb conjugations constitute a major problem because the languages the students are familiar with have very simple conjugations, e.g. in English it is only the third person singular that undergoes an inflection in the present tense, acquiring an -s ending. Kiswahili and most African languages that are agglutinating in a way conjugate the infinitive, and as such the verb stem is untouched. In Spanish the present tense requires that the infinitive ending be dropped and a series of

endings be added to the persons both singular and plural. It chances that the second person singular ends in –s in Spanish and this leads to confusion in the student's mind because remembering the English 3rd person ending he easily transfers this information to Spanish. In other cases, the conjugation means nothing and so the endings are added at random.

- There are concepts that are culture bound, and it is difficult for the students to understand them in a manner different from what they are used. A good example is the establishments that provide specific products. In Spain and the Spanish speaking countries they are gradually disappearing since the products in question can be found in the supermarkets all under one roof. The *lechería* caters for *dairy products*; the *librería* is strictly a *bookshop*; the *papelería* is strictly a *stationery shop*, etc. In Kenya there are small establishments called *kiosks*, owned by individuals. In a kiosk one can buy milk, bread, a biro pen, a radio battery, a bulb, an exercise book, tomatoes, etc. Similarly, in the Kenyan bookshops, one can buy stationery items, and in some cases travelling bags. With this in mind, it is not striking that a student buys *leche* *milk* in *papelería* and *espinacas* *spinach* in a *lechería*.
- A serious challenge is to get the students to practise the oral expression in class. The difficulty they face is understandable because the language is new to them, and yet they are required to use it, and they do not wish to appear ridiculous to their peers. There are those who, when asked a question in Spanish will answer in English, but it is clear they have understood the question. For the teacher this is positive and it only confirms that '*our receptive capabilities often exceed our expressive capabilities*. This is especially true in language development. Children seem to understand more than they can say.' (Goss 1995: 84). As the semester advances and they acquire confidence, and as they get to know one another, they speak freely.
- The Kenyan society may be very demanding on its members, and many times success means absence of failure. Greater part of the USIU student community holds the same concept of success: the only grade that one should score is A. It can be said that our society has lost the capacity to appreciate the wealth of learning from errors. This leads us to the question: Do errors play any positive role in language learning? Before answering this question, we should clarify what the term means: errors are '*idiosyncrasies in the interlanguage of the learner which are direct manifestations of a system within which a learner is operating at the time*.' (Brown 1987: 170). In other words, as Brown summarizes the idea, the learner's errors reveal some competence in the target language (1987). There are two kinds of errors: intra-lingual errors occur within the target language. They include confusion of words which are formally similar or have a similar meaning, and inappropriate collocation. Inter-lingual errors occur within the native language. These include literal translation and divergence (Sheshsa 1995).

'Second language learning is a process that is clearly not unlike first language learning in its trial-and-error nature. Inevitably learners will make mistakes in the process of acquisition, and indeed will even impede that process if they do not commit errors and then benefit in turn from various forms of feedback on those errors.' (Brown 1987: 170).

As mentioned previously, Spanish is totally unrelated to Swahili or the African languages spoken by the students. There is an advantage to this, because the chances of interference are minimal, just a few *false friends*. There is a danger, however, because for a certain period words mean nothing to the learner and he can attribute the wrong meaning to a word and consequently use it in the wrong context.

Reflections

Our survey shows that a multilingual society provides a very healthy environment for L3/L4 learning. Children from a multilingual society like Kenya handle so many phonemes from about the age of 3 that as they grow up acquiring new ones does not pose a problem as such. In the case of Spanish as a foreign language, we have seen that both languages, different as they may be, also have a lot in common. A healthy transfer of structures can be fostered, while the danger of interference is almost inexistent.

One of the most gratifying experiences when one is learning a language is to be able to read and write it well (at this stage we refer especially to dictation), in a relatively short time. This means that the student can monitor his progress, and that spurs him on to be proactive in his learning. The USIU experience is a good one, and this leads us to pose questions on second, third or fourth language acquisition: if our intellect is successful in learning other disciplines even at an advanced age, why should it be different when it comes to language? Besides, every field of human knowledge necessarily has to use language. Should we not conclude that man can learn a language successfully at any time in his life?

“The ‘classic’ argument is that a critical point for second language acquisition occurs around puberty, beyond which people seem to be relatively incapable of acquiring a native-like accent of the second language. This has led some scholars to assume, incorrectly, that by the age of 12 or 13 you are ‘over the hill’ when it comes to the possibility of successful language learning” (Brown 1987: 42). Naturally, as a person grows older, he will encounter more challenges (Sanz and Bever 2001). Naturally, due to the fact that he is an adult, his strategies will be different from those of a child.

Probably, we need to revisit our philosophy of man in second language learning, and renew our confidence in man’s cognitive capacity while focusing positively on errors. We should not forget that his will is also very important when the opportunity for L2 presents itself. One beautiful thing about learning language as an adult is that it offers us the opportunity of consciously re-living our childhood, thus learning language *naturally* in a certain way. Then the adult acquires a freedom that affords him the possibility of laughing at his errors, and laughing along with his companions at his errors.

Parents are the main facilitators in children’s language acquisition. “In the case of adult second language learning, parental input is replaced by teacher input. Teachers might do well to be as deliberate, but meaningful, in their communications with students as the parent is to the child, since input is as important to the second language learner as it is to the first language learner. This input should foster meaningful communicative use of the language” (Brown 1987: 56).

If the adult is to consciously become a child so as to facilitate learning a language, the teacher's role becomes as important as it was when we were small. When was our performance good in class? When we liked the teacher, and when he made us feel that he believed in us. If the teacher's attitude is positive, and the student perceives it, success is guaranteed. In other words, we are advocating for a holistic approach to man in teaching, and we are suggesting that the teacher's input determines the student's output to a large extent.

As per the native-like accent, the USIU experience and all the people we know who have learnt a language at a mature age makes us wonder whether that is not an overgeneralization. "Such an assumption must be viewed in the light of what it really means to be 'successful' in learning a second language, and particularly the role of 'accent' as a component of success" (Brown 1987: 42). We know people who have, e.g. and American accent, but their English leaves a lot to be desired.

About two years ago, I had a very interesting experience in Spain. I was selected to attend a course organised by AECI (Agencia española de cooperación internacional) for foreign lecturers of Spanish. It brought together about 180 teachers from different parts of the world. The impressive thing was that as they spoke, one could identify who had taught them Spanish, because the Japanese had an Argentinian accent apart from some other personal traits that indicated her mother tongue; one could detect a Mexican accent, a Colombian, a Spanish accent from the central part of Spain... These were grown ups, so what do we conclude about accent?

In conclusion, our study reveals that the multilingual learns Spanish faster than a bilingual owing to the fact that he has a greater exposure to a diversity of phonemes, and he can resort to healthy transfers of structures from one language to another and thus hasten the learning process. We also feel that the fact that Spanish and Swahili are so different from one another both genetically and morphologically constitutes a strength: there is little interference, and most of the information is new. This makes teaching and learning a real exciting adventure, since one is constantly on a discovery expedition.

Both teacher and student undergo a process of learning. There are no two students that are alike, and we suppose the student will say there are no two teachers that are alike. This means that following the same method and using the same approach does not necessarily imply uniformity in teaching or learning since both teacher and student have a unique contribution to make in order to make this process successful.

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